

Soldiers *Online*

“BAND OF BROTHERS”

The unbreakable bond among soldiers is the subject of a powerful new TV miniseries based on the actual World War II experiences of a group of 101st Airborne Division paratroopers.

BROTHERS"



"We hope to enlighten those who are unappreciative of the human cost of preserving our great freedoms."

— *Tom Hanks*



The miniseries follows the soldiers of “Easy” Company (*above and below*) from D-Day until the end of the war.

“BAND OF BROTHERS”

Story by Arthur McQueen

Photos by David James/HBO

WILLIAM Shakespeare summed up the experiences of comrades in battle in “Henry V,” Act IV, Scene III: *From this day to the ending of the world, But we in it shall be remembered, We few, we happy few, we band of brothers; For he today that sheds his blood with me, Shall be my brother; be he ne’er so vile.*

That unbreakable bond is a focus of a 10-part miniseries called “Band of Brothers” that will premiere Sept. 9 on HBO. It’s based upon the wartime experiences of “Easy” Company, part of the 101st Airborne Division’s 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, as documented in the book of the same

name by Stephen Ambrose.

Executive producers Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks, who were at Utah Beach in France for the filming of some of the segments of the series, got some firsthand accounts of Easy Co.’s World War II experiences from unit veterans who were flown to the site.

“We hope to enlighten those who



Arthur McQueen is a public affairs officer for U.S. Army, Europe, in Heidelberg, Germany.



Arthur McQueen

Retired MAJ Richard Winters, one of 47 Easy Co. veterans who visited Normandy in June, still remembers the sights and sounds of D-Day.



Arthur McQueen

Former 1LT Lynn Compton shared his memories of Easy Co. with cast members at the June gathering.

are unappreciative of the human cost of preserving our great freedoms,” said Hanks. “Deep down, [World War II] is a tragedy that affected thousands and thousands of people.”

“I was mesmerized by the whole story,” Ambrose said of his impetus for writing the book. The company traveled from the United States through England, Normandy, Holland, Belgium and to Hitler’s hideaway, the “Eagle’s Nest,” high atop the Bavarian Alps in Berchtesgaden, Germany, and occupation in Austria.

“I don’t know if we’re entitled to all this attention,” said former 1LT Lynn Compton, one of 47 Easy Co. veterans who visited Utah Beach in June to pay respects to fallen “brothers” and get a sneak preview of the miniseries. “There were other guys who did more than we did.”

“We hope none of the other veterans watch the series and think, ‘Look at that bunch of hotshots.’ We didn’t win the war. We only did our part,” said veteran Darrell Powers.

Easy Co. was part of the newly formed 2nd Battalion, 506th PIR, in July 1942. It joined the 101st Abn. Div. on June 10, 1943. The all-volunteer outfit, then a new concept for the Army, lured some to join by offering enlisted soldiers \$50 jump pay and officers \$100.

The filmmakers went to great lengths to ensure the authenticity of actors’ costumes and equipment (right) as well as the realism of the combat scenes (below).





Cast member Damian Lewis — one of several largely unknown actors chosen to play Easy Co. soldiers — reacts to “fire.”

“As a first lieutenant during the Depression, I was making \$21 a month,” said retired MAJ Richard Winters. “You can imagine the lure of being paid \$100 a month.”

Training wasn’t easy. Of an original 500 officers and 5,300 enlisted soldiers, 148 and 1,800 graduated from training, respectively, Winters said.

In 1942, spurred by stories that a Japanese unit had set a record by marching 100 miles in 72 hours, the regimental commander directed 2nd Bn. to march 118 miles from Fort Benning to Atlanta, Ga., in December. Despite freezing temperatures and backwoods roads, the soldiers completed the march in 75 hours, with only 12 of the unit’s 586 men falling out.

The unit completed its training in Aldbourne, England, in March 1944, as plans for Operation Overlord — the Allied invasion of western Europe — were being finalized. The unit moved to the town of Uppottery, where it stayed until the jump into France in the early morning hours of D-Day.

“Many of us shared the same-type thoughts about life and death,” Winters said. “Among the questions we asked

“BAND OF BROTHERS”

“To see the beach jammed with ships, and an American flag flying, brought tears to my eyes.”



Executive producers Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks feel their production accurately portrays the experiences of Easy Co. soldiers.



ourselves was: ‘Will I be here next spring to see flowers again?’”

The jump into Normandy marked the unit’s first use of a new piece of equipment, the leg bag, which was to be lowered to the ground before landing. Many men put their weapons and extra ammunition in the bags. Because the drop aircraft were flying so fast, the bags disengaged and were lost in the darkness over France. Winters said he learned only recently that the bags were defective, lacking rivets to hold them together.

Complicating matters further, the C-47 carrying Easy Co.’s pathfinders had been shot down earlier over the channel. Without the pathfinders’ guidance, the company’s members were spread over 20 kilometers.

The unit’s first task was to silence a battery of German artillery that was

threatening the landing at Utah Beach. Winters led six men to destroy four 105mm guns, killing 20 or more German soldiers and sending the remaining 40 off in hasty retreat, he said.

The 506th was the first unit to return to England, on July 13, to recuperate and prepare for the next jump. Upon entering the barracks at Aldbourne, they found the building half empty.

The rapid Allied advance through France led to a frustrating cycle of training and cancelled missions for the 506th, Winters said, until Operation Market Garden, in September 1944, when the unit was placed under British command for the jump into Holland.

During the ensuing battle, German resistance was heavy. And, while the proximity to German supply lines made daylight movement difficult, it often justified daylight artillery barrages, Winters said.

After that operation, the unit recovered in Mourmelon, France, until the Ardennes offensive that pitted the Allies against 25 enemy divisions — the famed “Battle of the Bulge.”

The 101st Abn. Div. was sent to relieve the defenders of encircled Bastogne and then continued fighting through Alsace. Easy Co. was the first unit to reach Hitler’s mountain top “Eagle’s Nest” in Bavaria, en route passing long columns of weary German soldiers looking for someone to surrender to.

The company celebrated the end of World War II by drinking Hitler’s stash of champagne.

Today, Winters, like many other veterans of the war, reflects upon its various aspects. But what he will never forget, he said, is the feeling he had when he returned to Utah Beach 30 days after D-Day.

“To see the beach jammed with ships, and an American flag flying, brought tears to my eyes,” Winters said. He still gets teary eyed when he attends a football game and the American flag is raised before the crowd. “I say to myself, ‘Maybe you wouldn’t be here if we all hadn’t done our jobs on D-Day.’” □

“Like a lot of the guys, I feel a definite responsibility to get it right, to honor these men.”

Helping Actors Play Soldiers

ACTORS don’t always have the luxury of being able to obtain advice from the real-life personalities they portray on screen.

Actor Frank Hughes, who plays SSG Bill Guarnere in “Band of Brothers,” was lucky.

“These are big shoes to fill,” said Hughes, who discussed with Guarnere everything from basic soldiering skills to how to act in combat. “During production, we talked about the script and how things might have been said by someone from Philadelphia, where Bill’s from.”

Actors playing the parts of soldiers who died in battle include David Schwimmer, who portrays CPT Herbert Sobel, “Easy” Company’s first commander. “Like a lot of the guys, I feel a definite responsibility to get it right, to honor these men,” Schwimmer said.

While many of Sobel’s men disliked him for his methods and manner, veterans of the unit credit him for honing their combat skills, said retired MAJ Richard Winters, a first lieutenant during the D-Day landings.

“He was a very conscientious man. To train soldiers for combat you have to be tough and strict to some extent, and you have to be a leader,” Winters said. “Sometimes you even have to be unreasonable.”

“I hope this does justice to the men who served in the unit,” said HBO special events director Michael McMorrow, who was largely responsible for getting veterans to Utah Beach in partnership with American Airlines. The airline flew veterans and their families to Paris, then chartered trains and buses to take them to Utah Beach.

“There was no more appropriate place to honor the heroism of the men of the 101st than by premiering their story at Utah Beach,” said HBO chief executive officer Jeffrey Bewkes. — Arthur McQueen



Arthur McQueen



Easy Co. veterans (seen above honoring the American flag during the Normandy ceremony) were in many cases able to add further realism to the series by advising the actors playing them (left) on the finer points of soldiering.